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Leaders and members



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Notes for
community leaders



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Getting people involved

"Mrs. Smith has done wonders for this club during the ten years she has been president. What will we ever do without her?"

"What we need in our organization is a good person at the top to give us dynamic leadership."

"This committee has fallen apart since Bill is no longer chairman."

In many of our community groups, the functions of leadership seem to be the responsibility of a single person, or of very few people. It is left to the president, the executive and the chairpersons of committees to plan and operate all the activities of the group. The members often seem content to be mere followers. Of course, if the leaders are careful to find out the wishes of the members, and if they are aware of the objectives of the group, this method of operation can be consistent with democratic principles.

However, this way of doing things brings up two important questions:

— Is it a good idea to expect just a few people to shoulder the whole load of responsibility that goes with successful group leadership?

— Won't the ordinary member lose interest if his or her membership in the group makes the member only the "rubber stamp" of the leaders, and only remotely involved in planning the objectives and the program?

Most modern students of the subject agree that "leadership" is the job of the group itself, rather than that of a few special persons in it. Many of the functions of leadership should be carried out through the combined effort of the general membership.

The role of the leadership

Leaders and members of community organizations are not two distinct species of people. These classifications refer only to the division of the work that is the basis of the group's function. Leaders have responsibilities as members of the organization. Members have responsibilities to share in the decision-making, goal-setting, program-planning and other jobs that are usually thought of as leadership responsibilities.

If the committee chairpersons, or organization officers always do all the thinking and all the jobs, the group members will become lazy. They will lean back and depend on the leaders to do the group's work.

What's wrong with that as long as everything gets done?

The fact is that the task of the group is not done when that happens. Members do not grow and develop skills, nor do they get the personal satisfaction or feelings of significance, the rewards that go with taking responsibility. Development of the members is always part of the organization's task.

Responsibility for the group is shared by all the members of the group. Decisions made by the whole group are more realistic and meaningful to the members. The members themselves ought to determine objectives, and decide on the methods the group will use to accomplish them. The role of the leader can be summed up in a few words:

— to assist the group members to find out what *they* want to do, and then to help *them* to do it.

This kind of democratic leadership is not easy! It calls for administrative skill and many special personal skills. The more adept the leader becomes in these arts, the more valuable the leader is to the group in which he or she works.

Good leadership encourages informality and eliminates, as far as possible, procedures that tend to make discussion, or the group's relationships, stiff or stilted. The leader should be concerned to preserve group harmony even when he or she knows that members have sharply different opinions.

The best methods are those that allow as many as possible of the group to take part in discussions and in activities.

Leadership must be flexible. People working in groups are growing, changing and developing. Ideally, it should be possible to change any of the rules and procedures as the needs and interests of the group change. Even the agenda for a single meeting might be modified if the group wishes it. Of course, it is not possible for all groups to achieve this degree of flexibility.

The group, including the leaders, should do its best to make individual members feel at home. If rules are kept to a minimum, seating at meetings is informal, and members have become accustomed to informal discussion, they will be able to get to know each other as people.

Good leaders help the group to evaluate its own progress. The evaluations should be brief, but careful and frank.

Leaders should be aware of the roles that members play in the performance of the group, and they should help the members to appreciate the importance of these roles so they will consciously fulfil them in a way that is helpful to the group.

Leaders should see that the initiative remains with the group and that the group has a continuing purpose in life.

How are we doing?

How well is the group tackling the job it has set for itself? How well are the leaders assisting the members? These are important questions to members and to leaders.

No one benefits from malicious post-mortems, but there can be little planning for the future unless the members have some way of judging whether their work has been a success, or a failure—and why.

The articles on evaluation in the *Evaluation* booklet suggest various ways groups may measure their progress.

Leaders should attempt to make honest evaluations of their own performances. They may ask a neutral outside person to act as observer and to report frankly and objectively about the effectiveness of the leaders in guiding the group toward its goal.

Or they may ask themselves some questions like these:

- does the group treat the leader as one of themselves?
- do the members help shy people participate?
- are the members learning to carry out some of the group members' roles suggested in the *Evaluation* booklet?
- do most members show an appreciation of the other person's point of view?
- do the members discipline themselves not to interrupt each other, to evaluate opinions objectively, and to ask for specific information when they need it?

Duties of officers

In addition to the general responsibilities leaders of an organization have to help the members to work and act effectively, each elected officer has particular responsibilities. The president and vice-president must know how to conduct formal meetings properly, how to preserve order and decorum when the group is disposing of routine business or preparing to make a formal decision. The secretary and the treasurer must know what reports and records are essential and how to prepare and maintain them.

The elected officers, perhaps together with the committee chairpersons, form the executive committee and are responsible for guiding and co-ordinating the administrative procedures of the organization. See the booklet on *Administration* for articles on the administration of community organizations.

President

The word “president” signifies one who presides. Traditionally one of the president’s chief responsibilities is to preside at formal sessions. See the book on *Effective Meetings* for more on the role of the president.

The president of a community organization may also be an ex-officio member of all standing and special committees. When the president attends committee meetings, he or she does so usually as an observer or as a resource person. The president’s attendance at committee meetings, and the committee chairperson’s attendance at meetings of the executive, are the chief means by which the work of the various groups in the organization is co-ordinated.

The president is the key figure in the co-ordination of the organization’s work. But the president does not do everything. He or she does not run the organization. As much responsibility as possible is delegated to others.

Often it is the president who appoints the chairperson of committees, if they are not elected or designated in some other way by the constitution. The chairperson in turn may select the committee members.

One of the president's most important duties is to see that the vice-president has the opportunity to conduct meetings occasionally during his or her term of office.

Vice-president

The vice-president assumes all the responsibilities of the president in the latter's absence, or when requested. In some organizations, the vice-president may be assigned other specific responsibilities by the constitution. For example, the vice-president may be the chairperson of the program committee or of the executive committee. Some organizations elect several vice-presidents.

Secretary

The secretary is responsible for keeping an accurate record of the proceedings and decisions of the organization. He or she has charge of:

- minutes of the meetings
- membership roll
- list of unfinished business correspondence
- reports and personnel committees
- constitution and by-laws.

See the booklet on *Administration* for a discussion of these administrative tools.

Treasurer

The treasurer receives and pays out the funds belonging to the organization. He or she, along with one other officer, signs all

the cheques, and has charge of the bank account. The treasurer maintains financial records in such a way that the executive or the general membership can have a financial report at any time. Usually once a year, when the books have been audited, a formal financial report is prepared. The treasurer guides the executive committee in preparing the annual budget and is very often chairperson of the finance committee.

Committee chairpersons or discussion leaders

The skill and maturity of the leader will have an important bearing on the ability to help the committee accomplish its task.

Learn to listen. The leader must pay attention to all expressions of opinion, not just to those he or she agrees with, or those in which he or she is personally interested. Every member has the right to state any views that are related to the subject. A leader who has developed the habit of good listening improves the efficiency of the group by helping the members understand one another better.

Don't get involved in the discussion. The leader of a discussion group is neutral. If a difference of opinion develops, the leader doesn't say who's right and who's wrong. He or she leads the group to its own evaluation of a statement or an opinion. The leader may suggest, if it serves this purpose, that the group should get more factual information, but not imply that Mr. Jones is "off base" and Mrs. Smith "right on".

Don't play favorites. Mrs. Doe may be the town's social leader and Mr. Roe the chairperson's best friend, but the shabby man in the corner has equal status and equal rights as a member of the group. His opinions, as well as those of any other member, should be treated according to their merits and not according to the social standing of the speaker.

Try to understand each speaker. If a person seems to have difficulty in expressing an idea clearly, the leader may help out with a few simple questions. A good leader is patient with the members and doesn't write off a person because he or she seems incoherent. Above all, a leader doesn't belittle any member of the group either by word or by implication.

Keep your personal prejudices under cover. Don't ride roughshod over the prejudices of others. Every member of the group brings to the meeting a personal cultural background, education, local environment, religion and family upbringing. These factors color the whole personality. Possibly some firmly-rooted attitudes will change as a result of the experiences a person has in the group. But these basic personal beliefs and ideas must be respected by the leader and by the group as a whole, even though there may be a troublesome difference in the opinions of that person and those of the majority.

Try to encourage clear understanding of each comment. By watching the members' reactions, the leader can often determine how well the group grasps a new idea. If the meaning of the words, the references used, or the relationship of any comment to the main theme, is not clear, the leader should urge the speaker, or some other member, to straighten out the difficulty. The leader should express the idea in easier terms, or else encourage the members to ask questions of the speaker. If a comment is not clearly understood, it confuses the discussion and adds nothing.

Members are important too

There are many ways of looking at members and their roles in community organizations.

One way is to look at them in terms of whether their membership is new or old.

- New members have yet to learn, to be tested and proven.
- The established member knows the ropes. He or she is active and secure.
- The old member who knows the ropes may be thinking of retiring, or may hang around in order to be helpful.

Another way of looking at members is to consider their *capacity* and abilities.

- The low-capacity member has little group experience or skill, little of the kind of knowledge needed, little time or resources to offer.
- The average member has usable abilities and capacity to handle several or many jobs reasonably well. He or she has sufficient group skill and resources to make a continuous contribution.
- The high-capacity member seems to have a way of moving in on every situation with competence and ease. He or she never seems to have trouble acting in a manner that is helpful to the group.

We might also look at members from the point of view of their loyalty to the group.

- Casual members place many things above the association with the group. They share in the group only when it is convenient—when there are no other demands on their time and resources.
- Steady members try to contribute a full share to the group. They respond to any reasonable demands on their time.
- Dedicated members place very few things above the association with the group. They are seldom prevented from taking part in everything that goes on.

Why members belong

People join and remain members of groups for many reasons—and the reasons may change from time to time.

Members are usually first attracted to an organization because its stated objectives have meaning for them. If an organization is to remain vital through the years, it must be able to sell the value of its objectives to prospective and present members. The job of presenting these goals to the community is discussed in its different aspects in the booklet *Publicity and public relations*.

Most people maintain their memberships in organizations, and continue to contribute to the common goals, for the sake of the satisfaction they get from the group. In the company of others, the individual members may be seeking:

- to belong
- for recognition
- for the sense of accomplishment
- for adventure and change of pace
- for self-expression.

Many of them may even have some less positive needs such as these:

- to escape, to hide in the group
- to dominate, to fight and be aggressive
- to depend on other people.

An organization is the sum total of the thought and effort of its members. The whole group must move toward the fulfilment of the organization's goals; which are, after all, what holds the group together. But the speed and steadiness of its progress will depend on whether it retains the enthusiasm and interest of its members by satisfying their personal needs at the same time.

The interest, needs and attitudes of people who are thinking and working together change, and so the membership of a vital organization is usually slowly changing. Early members become less active or retire, new members are recruited from the community. In some groups a rapid turn-over of members is normal; these are short-term groups that change their members perhaps as often as every two or three years. Other groups have a longer period and some groups continue indefinitely, the membership roll changing only at a very slow rate.

Meeting group and personal needs

The progress and vitality of the group, and the satisfaction of its members, is in proportion to the extent and appropriateness of the members' contributions.

So the big questions are these:

- How, and in what way, can members contribute?
- What kinds of contributions are helpful?
- What can the group do to improve the ability of its members to contribute?

Here are several factors which may help or hinder people working together effectively toward the aims of the group, and provide personal satisfaction to the members.

Atmosphere People must feel comfortable if they are to work well together. This calls for easy introductions to each other, relaxed help from the leader and a knowledge that all members may speak freely and think aloud. Physical atmosphere is important too, but emotional atmosphere is even more important.

Pleasant inter-personal relationships When people try to act as a group, feelings of anxiety, personal rivalry and a sense of threat often develop and interfere with the working of the group. A constant effort must be made to reduce and control these feelings so that the group is free to deal with its problems rather than with inter-personal differences.

Roles The various jobs that must be done to keep a group in running order must be shared. Leadership is just one of these roles; other roles that the members carry out are equally important.

Goals People should be ready to adjust methods and alter goals when appropriate. This requires flexibility on the part of the members. Groups will want to agree on ground rules, or some kind of flexible procedure, but they must also be willing to change these ground rules when there is need, for the good of the group.

Evaluation Groups need to be able to see how they are doing, and to figure out how to improve.

What makes a good member?

The member who will ultimately be able to accept and carry out leadership responsibility in the organization strives first to learn to be a good follower. A pattern based on the attributes of many successful and effective members of community organizations stresses the following points, adapted from Harleigh B. Trecker's *Group process in administration*, Woman's Press, New York, 1950.

Before accepting membership and before agreeing to act on a committee, the good member will recognize and accept the fact that the job will take time, and will arrange that time for the group's work.

Indifference is a barrier to constructive action. A responsible member attends meetings regularly. When unavoidably absent, the member finds out what went on.

The good member knows that the contribution of ideas, experiences, opinions and beliefs is important to the group. He or she contributes willingly, not mere talk, but real efforts to participate in the exchange of ideas from which all will benefit. At the same time, the member guards against monopolizing the time available and tries to help the group leader draw out contributions from the others.

Each member can and should make a constant contribution toward helping the chairperson or group leader keep everyone on the beam, with attention focussed on the primary goals of the group. This implies, of course, that the member is fully aware of the goals. If in doubt, the good member will not hesitate to ask the questions that will get matters straightened out.

The productive member takes any assignment of responsibility seriously. This includes the general responsibility of being informed about each agenda in advance, and having special assignments ready when they are needed. He or she recognizes that the work of the organization will come to a standstill unless all members play their parts.

The best kind of member recognizes that participation calls for effort to integrate personal ideas with those of other people. A member tries to keep the discussion fair and impersonal and, when he or she wishes to raise objections, does so openly in front of the group.

Responsible participation calls for the regular evaluation of one's own work in the group.

When individual members take part according to this pattern, they discover their value in the group. They are able to raise their status. They see the meaning of their activity and receive the satisfaction of team accomplishments.

Members' roles

Members can only contribute to the growth and vitality of their organization through the roles they play in the committees, and in the planning and study groups that carry out the work. As each member shoulders a share of the responsibility for planning, goalsetting, and other decision-making, they will learn to recognize and carry out the jobs that keep a group in running order. Some of these jobs in a healthy group are:

- stating the issues clearly
- asking for information
- giving information
- arbitrating
- summarizing
- evaluating progress.

As the members become aware that their progress depends on these jobs being done, they begin to realize that everyone and anyone in the group can perform them at different times. Then they see that if everyone can fulfil the group-needed roles, the leader or chairperson is not the only person needed to keep the group operating.

If everyone sees the jobs to be done and assumes a share of the load, the task of the group can be done more quickly, more efficiently and with more satisfaction. Our goal, then, should be progress to the point where some of the roles or jobs are done appropriately and alternately by all the members of the group, as the need arises.

Training in various member roles*

Nobody can work efficiently if he or she resents the task being worked on, is discouraged by its difficulty or is simply tired. If people are to do their best, they must be willing to undertake the job, feel that they are able to do it, and be reasonably alert. Most workers pay a good deal of attention to these attitudes, as they do their own work or to supervising the work of others. Besides having the knowledge, skills and equipment the job calls for, a worker must be in physical and mental condition to work well.

A group, like an individual, needs the knowledge, skills and equipment its job calls for. It needs also to be in good working condition—willing to work, confident and alert. If a group is to reach and maintain high productivity, its members have to provide for two kinds of needs—what it takes to do the job and what it takes to strengthen and maintain the group.

What members must do to meet these needs may be called *functional roles*.

What the members do that tends to make the group inefficient or weak may be called *non-functional behavior*.

Here is a glossary of some of the most essential *functional roles* of group members.

Task roles

Functions required in selecting and carrying out a group task:

- ☐ *Initiating activity*: proposing solutions; suggesting new ideas, new definitions of the problem, new attack on problem or new organization of material.
- ☐ *Seeking information*: asking for clarification of suggestions, requesting additional information or facts.

*The material under this heading is reprinted from the *Adult leadership* "tool kit" of January 1953. *Adult leadership* is a publication of the Adult Education Association of the U.S.A.

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- ☐ *Seeking opinion*: looking for an expression of feeling about something from the members, seeking clarification of values, of suggestions or ideas.
 - ☐ *Giving information*: offering facts or generalizations, relating one's own experience to group problem to illustrate a point.
 - ☐ *Giving opinion*: stating an opinion or belief concerning a suggestion or one of several questions, particularly concerning its value rather than its factual basis.
 - ☐ *Elaborating*: clarifying, giving examples or developing meanings, trying to envision how a proposal might work out if adopted.
 - ☐ *Co-ordinating*: showing relationships among various ideas or suggestions, trying to pull ideas and suggestions together, trying to draw together activities of various sub-groups or members.
 - ☐ *Summarizing*: pulling together related ideas or suggestions, re-stating suggestions after the group has discussed them.
 - ☐ *Testing feasibility*: making application of suggestions to real situations, examining practicality and workability of ideas, pre-evaluating decisions.

Group building and maintenance roles

Functions required in strengthening and maintaining group life and activities are:

- ☐ *Encouraging*: being friendly, warm, responsive to others, praising others and their ideas, agreeing with and accepting contributions of others.
- ☐ *Gate keeping*: trying to make it possible for another member to make a contribution to the group by saying, "We haven't heard anything from Jim yet," or suggesting limited talking for everyone so that all will have a chance to be heard.
- ☐ *Standard setting*: expressing standards for group to use in choosing its content or procedures, or in evaluating its decisions; reminding group to avoid decisions which conflict with group standards.

☐ *Following*: going along with the decisions of the group, somewhat passively accepting ideas of others, serving as audience during group discussions and decision-making.

☐ *Expressing group feeling*: summarizing what group feeling is sensed to be, describing reactions of the group to ideas or solutions.

Both group task and group maintenance roles

☐ *Evaluating*: submitting group decisions or accomplishments to comparison with group standards, measuring accomplishments against goals.

☐ *Diagnosing*: determining sources of difficulties, appropriate steps to take next, the main blocks to progress.

☐ *Testing for consensus*: tentatively asking for group opinions in order to find out if the group is nearing consensus on a decision, sending up trial balloons to test group opinions.

☐ *Mediating*: harmonizing, conciliating differences in points of view, making compromise solutions.

☐ *Relieving tension*: draining off negative feeling by jesting or pouring oil on troubled waters, putting a tense situation in wider context.

Non-functional behavior

From time to time—more often perhaps than anyone likes to admit—people behave in *non-functional* ways that do not help and sometimes actually harm the group and the work it is trying to do.

Note: In using a classification for the behavior, people need to guard against the tendency to blame any person (whether themselves or another) who falls into “non-functional” behavior. It is more useful to regard such behavior as a symptom that all is not well with the group’s ability to satisfy individual needs through group-centred activity. Further, people need to be alert to the fact that each person is likely to interpret such behavior differ-

ently. For example, what appears as blocking to one person may appear to another as a needed effort to test feasibility.

Some of the more common types of non-functional behavior are described below.

- ☐ *Being aggressive*: working for status by criticizing or blaming others, showing hostility against the group or some individual, deflating the ego or status of others.
- ☐ *Blocking*: interfering with the progress of the group by going off on a tangent, citing personal experiences unrelated to the problem, arguing too much on a point, rejecting ideas without consideration.
- ☐ *Self-confessing*: using the group as a sounding board, expressing personal, non-group-oriented feelings or points of view.
- ☐ *Competing*: vying with others to produce the best idea, talk the most, play the most roles, gain favor with the leader.
- ☐ *Seeking sympathy*: trying to induce other group members to be sympathetic to one's problems or misfortunes, deploring one's own situation or disparaging one's own ideas to gain support.
- ☐ *Special pleading*: introducing or supporting suggestions related to one's own pet concerns or philosophies, lobbying.
- ☐ *Horsing around*: clowning, joking, mimicking, disrupting the work of the group.
- ☐ *Seeking recognition*: attempting to call attention to one's self by loud or excessive talking, extreme ideas, unusual behavior.
- ☐ *Withdrawing*: acting indifferent or passive, resorting to excessive formality, day-dreaming, doodling, whispering to others, wandering from the subject.

Improving member roles

Any group is strengthened and enabled to work more efficiently if its members:

- Become conscious of the functional roles the group needs at any one time; find out the degree to which they are helping to meet these needs through what they do;
- Undertake effective self-training to improve their member-role behavior.

Further reading

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